Splendid Isolation and Cruel Returns (November 2004)

Does Robinson Crusoe, in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, really believe he should have "settle[d] at home according to [his] Father's Desire[s]" (7)? Since the text shows he deemed living at home a life of captivity, and that he found the island he was stranded on very fulfilling, it's clear he's suffering from considerable self-deception here. Does Gulliver, in Jonathon Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, really believe it was his misfortune that "Fortune, [his] [. . .] perpetual Enemy" prevented him from "pass[ing] the rest of his life among these admirable *Houyhnhnms*" (240)? Since he occupies himself much more with the affairs of his enemies than he does the accomplishments of friends, he clearly does not. For him as well, that is, the ostensible worst option is really the vastly preferred choice—for even if to gods, servitude is apparently only good if it empowers cruelty upon lessers upon your return home… allow me to elaborate.

It is hard to argue that Crusoe *comes* to regret his decision to leave his father, for just as soon as he "broke loose" (8) from him he ostensibly knew right away what a colossal mistake it was to set out on his own. In fact, within the very same paragraph in which he broke loose he tells us he "began now seriously to reflect upon what [he] [. . .] had done, and how justly [he] [. . .] was overtaken by the Judgment of Heaven for [his] [. . .] wicked [decision to] leav[e] [his] [. . .] Father's house, and [to] abandon [his] [. . .] Duty" (9). Crusoe's not conveying *any* happiness or exhilaration upon breaking free is puzzling. Surely he must have felt somewhat elated afterwards, experienced some kind of victory-related rush—why not relate this feeling? Why in his account does he depict no moment, in public or in private, of how he celebrated his release? Maybe there wasn't any such moment, but I highly suspect there was, only in recounting his departure from his father he felt compelled to avoid conveying the pleasure he experienced in both disobeying his father and in finally starting upon a self-directed life. Damning criticism of one's parents is never an easy thing to just *lay down*—most times, our superego will in fact not stand for it, and will afflict us with the likes of castration anxiety or fears of abandonment should we insist on doing so. Crusoe certainly avoids overtly criticizing his father in his account—he describes him, rather, very appreciatively. We are told that his father was "a wise and grave man, [who] gave [him] [. . .] serious and excellent Counsel" (5), that his father was

affectionate—"he press'd me earnestly, and in the most affectionate manner, not to play the young Man"—and sincere—his "Tears r[an] down his Face very plentifully" (7). He would deter his son from pursuing the life he wants to pursue, but for generous reasons: he wants his son to "slide[e] gently thro' the World, and sensibly tasting the Sweets of living, without the bitter" (7). Essentially, he wants for his son what the speaker of Lady Mary Chudleigh's "The Resolve" wants for herself, to be "happy in [his] [. . .] humble state" (21). Crusoe dares say he "broke free," but largely avoids assessing his former life so he could not but admit to himself that it really was the obvious—a cage—he had succeeded in breaking free from. And when he departs, Crusoe attends only to his own character flaws. We learn that he was "obstinately deaf to all Proposals" (Defoe 8), and that he "consulted neither Father or Mother [about his departure] [. . .]; but left them to hear of it as they might, without asking God's blessing, or my Father's, without any Consideration of Circumstances or Consequences, and in an ill Hour" (9).

His father offers him a life where he "was under no Necessity of seeking [his] [. . .] Bread" (7). He would be fed, he would be safe. He would know a routine life, full of happiness, but void of excitement. He would never know from his own experience if the one his father presented him with was the best available, but his father tells him he would still know from everyone's envying him (6). We might wonder, however, if everyone really would envy a man who could never find his way to "leave [his] [. . .] Father's house" (9). Perhaps a good number might actually think that such a man, never knowing what it feels like to live on your own, lived but a posher one one would *force* upon a slave.

I suspect Crusoe thought as much, but was fearful of directly lambasting his father's intention to keep him rooted in place. However, if we accept Norman Holland argument that "unsavory wishful fantasies" are reworked in fiction so that they are "consciously satisfying [to] [. . .] the ego and unconsciously satisfying to the deep wishes being acted out by the literary work" (104), we find that he does convey his anger at this father elsewhere in his account.

Crusoe allowed for some textual padding, for some time to lapse, before making clear what it is about people and places that draws him to break free from them—not much, though, for just twenty pages after his departure, he recounts for us how he narrowly avoided living a life of captivity. A Moorish captain captures him at sea, admires him (he thought him valuable property for he was "young and nimble and fit

for his Business" [Defoe 18]), and decides to keep him as his servant. Because he is being compelled to live the life of a domestic, forever "look[ing] after his little Garden," tending to "his House" and "his Ship," Crusoe decides his situation "could not be worse" (18). He would be "commanded" and "order'd" (30) about. He therefore "meditated nothing but [his] [. . .] Escape" (18), for he "was resolved to have [his] [. . .] Liberty" (21). Being a valuable slave, he might have been well kept, but what bothers Crusoe is that *someone else* is determining his life. He despises the idea of orbiting around someone else, of being someone who lives to satisfy *other people's* needs. Though he does conceive of the Moorish captain as an agent of (his father's) prophecy (28), he also makes clear that the Moor is a tyrant, and that his thoughts of liberation are fully justified. But if he finds living a provisioning but kept domestic life so odious here, we should understand the true mover behind his leaving his father, not wanderlust, but rather staunch refusal of the caged life. He *was* capable of an honest assessment of such a life, but could manage it only where his honesty would not look to insult or condemn his father.

Crusoe, however, never admits to being right in disobeying his father. The way in which Gulliver relates to his Houyhnhnm masters is about how he would admit he ought to have attended to him. The Houyhnhnms and Crusoe's father are similar to one another, valuing much the same things—"Temperance, *Industry*, *Exercise*, and *Cleanliness*" (251), by the Houyhnhnms, and "Temperance, Moderation, Quietness, [and] [. . .] Health" (6), by Crusoe's father. However, unlike Crusoe, Gulliver ostensibly is never interested in breaking free from wise fathers, but rather in spending the whole of his life amongst his new-found betters. He tells us he was so eager to learn the Houyhnhnms' ways that he "never presumed to speak, except in answer to a Question; and then [he] [. . .] did it with inward Regret, because it was a Loss of so much Time for improving" (259) himself. He admires how their young do exactly as their parents bid: "[Y]oung Couple[s] meet and are joined, merely because it is the Determination of their Parents and Friends: It is what they see done every Day; and they look upon it as one of the necessary Actions in a reasonable Being" (250). He takes pleasure in being their servant, appreciates their reasoning nature, their evident superiority to him, and agrees to follow their directions to the best of his ability. Therefore, though he is commanded and ordered about (e.g., "my master commanded me silence" [2417]), he acknowledges no reason for complaint.

Gulliver believes he will live a life of relative peace and tranquility—the sort of

life Crusoe's father offers Crusoe. But "In the Midst of all this Happiness, when [he] [. . .] looked upon [himself] [. . .] to be fully settled for Life" (260), he learns that he must depart the island. He tells us he was devastated by the news—"I was struck with the utmost Grief and Despair at my Master's Discourse; and being unable to support the Agonies I was under, I fell into a Swoon at his Feet" (262)—and upon later recounting it, damns Fortune for the terrible turn. But if Fortune was indeed responsible, she deserved better than that from him—for Gulliver really wanted to leave, only this wasn't something he could own up to.

Gulliver becomes a servant, and we hear of how he obeys orders and commands—but I am not arguing that like Crusoe he wanted to depart so to be free from captivity. Rather, I think he was ready to leave the Houyhnhnms because he was *done with them*; they had served their purpose, and had nothing more to offer. The Houyhnhnms had heard all of his complaints concerning the European culture he loathed, validated his surly opinion of it, and provided him with justification for thinking himself superior to the rest of the Yahoos. This done, it was time to return home to be within easy reach of said Yahoos, whom he could now subjugate without self-reproach.

The Houyhnhnms evict Gulliver from their island for fear that, however unlikely, he could yet still lead a revolt. They ultimately judge that Gulliver, still a Yahoo, is not to be trusted—and they are right in this, he isn't. He quite readily misleads his readers, for instance. Though he claimed he was primarily interested in the Houyhnhnms, and though he does provide us with "some account of the manner and customs of" those "which it was indeed [his] [. . .] principal Study to learn" (249), he actually ends up spending the best part of his account detailing *European* life and manners. He says he was compelled to provide this information to the Houyhnhnms. His master was eager to be informed of "the whole State of *Europe,*" "often desiring fuller Satisfaction," and his master's immense desire (an example of excess in a Houyhnhnm?) ostensibly accounts for why the discussion of European life possibly seemed—*for us*—"a Fund of Conversation not to be exhausted" (228). He tells us he would rather have kept quiet and studied their ways, but since no one compelled him to relate all of these details to "us," he clearly is much more interested in criticizing his previous home than in detailing the various what-nots of Houyhnhnms' oh-so-compelling how-tos.

Note how even when establishing what his life amongst the Houyhnhnms was

like he does so in a way which has us actually mostly attending to European life:

> I enjoyed perfect Health of Body, and Tranquillity of Mind; I did not feel the Treachery or Inconstancy of a Friend, nor the Injuries of a secret or open Enemy. I had no Occasion of bribing, flattering or pimping, to procure the Favor of any great Man, or of his Minion. I wanted no Fence against Fraud or Oppression: Here was neither Physician to destroy my Body, nor Lawyer to ruin my Fortune: No Informer to watch my Words and Actions, or forge Accusations against me for Hire; Here were no Gibers, Censurers, Backbiters, Pickpockets, Highwaymen, House-breakers, Attorneys, Bawds, Buffoons, Gamesters, Politicians, Wits, Spleneticks, tedious Talkers, Controvertists, Ravishers, Murderers, Robbers, Virtuoso's; no Leaders or Followers of Party and Faction; no Encouragers to Vice, by Seducement or Examples: No Dungeon, Axes, Gibbets, Whipping-posts, or Pillories; No cheating Shopkeepers or Mechanicks: No Pride, Vanity or Affectation: No Fops, Bullies, Drunkards, strolling Whores, or Poxes: No ranting, lewd, expensive Wives: No stupid, proud Pedants: No importunate, over-bearing, quarrelsome, noisy, roaring, empty, conceited, swearing Companions: No Scoundrels, raised from the Dust upon the Merit of their Vices; or Nobility thrown into it on account of their Virtues: No Lords, Fiddlers, Judges or Dancing-masters (258-59).

Obviously, if this passage reflects how he experienced life amongst the Houyhnhnms, European life was very much on his mind while amongst them. And, in this passage at least, the outpouring of details, of complaint, cannot be accounted for by Houyhnhnms' demand for fuller satisfaction.

Since the text shows that Gulliver enjoyed all his complaining, we should not think he was prepared to leave it all behind him. Rather, we should ask ourselves if what he really wanted was for his natural inclination to believe himself superior to find sanction from some higher power, noting that the Houyhnhnms, so "orderly and rational, so acute and judicious" (211), are also *so perfectly suited, are so "right,"* to help him out with this. Though they judge Gulliver a Yahoo, they deem him unique for his race—unlike other Yahoos, he, much like a Houyhnhnm, is "Teachable, Civil and Clean" (218). Why would he want that? Because he is sadist who wants to bully

people, but needs validation to make his inclination sound. When he returns home, we note his domineering ways: the first thing he recounts for us is how quickly and unsparingly he established order in his household. He is disgusted by his family, and will not let them near him. He abuses us readers as well. After he explains how much his family disgusted him, he speaks to his "gentle Reader" (272). *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* teaches gentle contemporary students that Gulliver must be being ironic here, for his "'gentle readers must be Yahoos" (2443). But *Longman* is not on the mark, for not ironic or playful, Gulliver is here simply being cruel: he insinuates that his readers, who very likely would prefer to understand themselves gentle / genteel, are in truth, foul. As we observe from the way he treats his family, Yahoos aren't worth being civil to, and cannot be effectively handled civilly in any case. They are savages that need to have their savagery pointed out to them (in between beatings, very likely) so they will know improvement, and just possibly, seek it out, however much beside the point.

There are other times where he expresses his dismay at, and his dislike for, his readers. When he writes, "[h]aving already lived three Years in this Country, the Reader I suppose will expect, that I should, like other Travelers, give him some Account of the Manner and Customs of its Inhabitants" (249), we sense him sighing, even sneering, at our expectations. His being resigned to placate us suggests he deems us "the most unteachable of all Animals, [with] [our] [. . .] Capacities never reaching higher than to draw or carry Burthens" (248). Elsewhere he insinuates that his readers—so unlike the Houyhnhnms—are largely uncaring and completely self-interested: "This is enough to say upon the Subject of my Dyet, wherewith other Travelers fill their books, as if the Readers were personally concerned, whether we fare well or ill" (217).

It is useful to think of Gulliver as intending to think himself literally put-off by his readers, in finding himself physically, spacially drawn away from them, for perhaps Gulliver prefers to imagine us at a distance to avoid any reoccurrence of the physical revulsion he experienced when his wife embraced him upon his return home. However, it is of course more appropriate to look to *Crusoe* for an account of the pleasure had from commanding a wide-birth of physical space. One of Crusoe's first actions on the island is to build a "Fortification" (59). But though he fears hostile engagements with savages, none occur until many years go by. In the meantime, he extends his knowledge of the island, the breadth of his domain. He develops a

country bower and grows crops. Incrementally he "prepare[s] more [and more] land" (101). The expansion of his domain expands his sense of himself, until finally, as the scholar Pat Rogers argues, "we should consider Crusoe's increasing readiness to see himself as 'Governour' [. . .] as [him feeling] the monarch of all he surveys" (44).

Crusoe certainly enjoys being "a monarch." He tells us, "I descended a little on the side of that delicious vale, surveying it with a secret kind of pleasure [. . .] to think that this was all my own, that I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession; and if I could convey it, I might have it in inheritance as completely as any lord of a mannor in England" (Defoe 99). Rogers argues that Crusoe was indeed having so much indulgent fun that "it is hard not to feel that Defoe was indulging at some level in a fantasy of himself as colonial proprietor" (45).

Michael Boardman argues that "[t]he situation of exile, even the peace that comes form his mastering of nature, might seem less than ideal as a scene for the agonics of repentance" (56). I concur, and believe we should wonder just how much of even his initial despair owed to a concern to not show his father up. His father told him to avoid the "secret burning Lust of Ambition" (Defoe 7) and prophesized that "if he goes abroad he will be the miserablest Wretch that was ever born" (8), and Crusoe felt the need to prove his father right, insisting to the forefront of his consciousness that the island was his despair, while relaxing to his default—ready enjoyment of the island—when the guilt had been dealt with. But even when he despairs, the text actually works *against* summing up his overall experience of exile as despairing. For example, when he finishes listing the "Evil" and "Good" things about life on the island, he concludes that "here was an undoubted Testimony, that there was scarce any Condition in the World so miserable, but there was something *Negative* or something *Positive* to be thankful for in it" (58). Yet when we look at the list we notice that far more is written under the Good side than under the Evil side of the ledger. This discrepancy is especially significant since, unlike a listing of debits and credits, the Good side is written in response to that put under the Evil side. That is, the weight of his interest resides in countering what he'd put down on the ledger's damning left-hand side.

As his account proceeds other things accrue to him that also ought fairly to be put on the Good side, if only he could manage it. Remarkably, for instance, he apparently loses his inclination to wander. Even though, after exploring the rest of the island, he admits he "had pitch'd upon a Place to fix [his] [. . .] Abode, which was

by far the worst Part of the Country" (100), he decides he would not "by any Means [. . .] remove" (101). Hearing this, we have further cause to wonder if he ever really suffered from wanderlust, that is, if perhaps he only felt the need to "run quite away" (7-8) when his life was being determined for him. Crusoe also acquires wisdom. He tells us he learned that "we never see the true State of our Condition, till it is illustrated to us by its Contraries; nor know how to value what we enjoy, but by the want of it" (118). And from this statement we know of another thing he wouldn't but certainly *ought* to place under the Good side of his ledger—specifically, that his father was clearly wrong to deter him from setting out on his own. We remember his father telling him he should live the middling life, for that way he would "tast[e] the sweets of living without the bitter." But Crusoe concludes that if one lives without being "expos'd to [. . .] vicissitudes" (6), one cannot enjoy life, for those who know only the good things in life would never know or "feel that they are happy" (7). Crusoe decides that the venturesome life, the life his father did not want him to lead, actually lead him to know and therefore savor happiness.

Crusoe individuates from his father on the island, a father, whose understanding of what was best for his son was clearly limited. Though even as an older man Crusoe still persists in believing he would have better off had he never left home, in his covert challenges to his father's benevolence and wisdom, in his written articulations of the pleasures and awareness he took from a way of life his father would think of as befouling, he establishes the evident rightness of his decision to set out on his own. He is to be believed when he tells us he "thought [he] liv'd really very happily in all things, except that of Society" (122), and later when he tells us how "in [his] [. . .] twenty third Year of residence in this Island, [. . .] [he] was so naturalized to the Place, and to the Manner of Living, that could [. . .] [he] have but enjoy'd the Certainty that no Savages would come to the Place to disturb [. . .] [him] , [. . .] [he] could have been content to have capitulated for spending the rest of [. . .] [his] Time there, even to the last Moment, till [. . .] [he] had laid me down and dy'd, like the old Goat in the Cave" (152). For Crusoe had found for himself pretty close to what the speaker of Anne Finch's "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat" desperately wanted, namely, "A sweet, but absolute retreat, / 'Mongst paths so lost, and trees so high, / That the world may ne'er invade" (3-5). Gulliver, on the other hand, since he never convinces us he is more interested in the Houyhnhnms than he is in criticizing European society, also never convinces us he wanted to leave it all behind him. Rather, he shows himself—

as the speaker of Miss W—'s "The Gentleman's Study" assesses Jonathan Swift—just someone who actually would rather "write of [. . .] odious men" (4) than "write of angels" (1).

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